DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 670 FL 024 623

AUTHOR Pavlos, Pavlou
TITLE Racial Epithets and Other Labels: Their Social Meaning and EFL Students' Awareness.
PUB DATE 1996-00-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Proceedings of the Greek Applied Linguistics Association 11th International Conference on the "Sociolinguistic Dimension in the Teaching and Learning of Modern Languages" (Volos, Greece, December 20-24, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Context; *English (Second Language); Ethnic Stereotypes; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Language Research; Language Usage; Questionnaires; *Racial Bias; *Racial Identification; Second Language Learning; *Sociocultural Patterns; Student Attitudes; *Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

A study assessed the awareness of English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) learners concerning a set of English lexical items referring to racial or ethnic heritage, and examined how this awareness might predict the learner's linguistic behavior. Subjects were 40 university students of varying linguistic background enrolled in beginning and advanced EFL classes, who completed a questionnaire concerning (1) basic familiarity with each term, (2) which terms were part of the student's active lexical repertoire, and (3) degree of awareness of the sociocultural, affective meaning of the terms. In general, subjects reported familiarity with most terms, but some reported lack of familiarity with a term and later provided judgments about its relative negativeness. In some cases, students were unaware that some labels are highly emotionally loaded. It is recommended that EFL students be explicitly taught all or some of the terms, with two qualifications: regional differences in usage may exist, and distinctions must be made between in-group and outsider use. Contains five references. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 416 670

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Pavlou Pavlos

Intercollege, Nicosia, Cyprus

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Pavlos
Pavlou
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

RACIAL EPITHETS AND OTHER LABELS: THEIR SOCIAL MEANING AND EFL STUDENTS' AWARENESS

Introduction

Successful learning of a second language means more than mastery of the linguistic code. Language is the reflection of the culture of the speech community that employs a particular code variety for communication. Therefore, in order for a second language learner to achieve communicative competence in the target language he or she must also develop sociolinguistic and cultural competence. The knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language combined with the experience of using language in authentic contexts will contribute to the development of competence.

Interest in this study was inspired by my experience as a foreign student in Europe and the United States. During my stay in each of two countries I tried to experience the indigenous culture as much as possible. Part of the acculturation process I experienced involved getting familiar with the social and political climate of the country of residence. As anyone who has shared the experience of assimilation can attest interaction and real communication with native speakers is a must. This was not an easy task and involved much more effort than simply learning the linguistic code of the speech community I wanted to join.

A common and salient feature of my daily interactions was the observation of others (or my own) use of terms of address or reference. In every society there are the favored groups and the scapegoats; the privileged few and the forgotten others. The use of address or referring expressions for groups or an individual of that group, especially pejorative ones, is always subject to the social perspective of the speaker. A non-native speaker hearing a new word for the first time will not generally know its full range of meaning, especially the potential derogatory or pejorative "flavor" it can have. As second language learners continue to interact with native speakers and select lexical items from their passive repertoire for active use there is a serious potential for miscommunication.

Serious difficulty may be experienced due to the lack of awareness of semantic or pragmatic features which make a label inappropriate for general, unmarked use. Learners may not match the setting, or take into account the interlocutor's

FL024023

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

identity, or recognize other contextual features that could effectively prohibit acceptable use. How then can we help students avoid being characterized as foolish, rude or even racist when they have no intention to be seen as such? Second language teachers may not see creating such awareness as one of their myriad responsibilities since it is not often included in texts or syllabi. Clearly language teachers as teachers of the L2 culture can exercise a special role in familiarizing their students with language which is controversial and emotionally loaded, and has the potential for involving the unwitting speaker in embarrassing or even dangerous situations.

In the United States social problems that have deep historical roots, and in particular, those related to racial or ethnic differences, have yet to be resolved. Persons belonging to one of a multitude of different groups can be classified using various racial or ethnic labels. As terms of address or reference these may be applied, for example, to Americans of African, Asian, Hispanic or any ethnic or national descent. Of course, within such a group these labels are not synonymous and have a range of social meaning which can alternatively show varying degrees of respect or disrespect, even hatred toward group members. This study was basically motivated by an interest in knowing how familiar second language learners are with racial and ethnic labels and what needs to be done to improve that awareness.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the EFL learner's level of awareness for a set of English lexical terms referring to racial or ethnic heritage, and to provide an indication as to how this awareness might predict the learner's linguistic behavior. Informants were asked to complete a three-part questionnaire. In addition to the necessary demographic information needed for analysis, students were asked a series of questions in each of three sections. Part 1 questions elicited answers which could reveal a student's basic familiarity with each of the terms. Part 2 sought to identify which of the terms were part of the student's active lexical repertoire. And part 3 questions attempted to determine degree of the student's awareness of the sociocultural, affective meaning of the terms.

A total of 40 students completed the questionnaire. Twenty were enrolled in basic EFL classes and 20 in advanced classes in the Department of English as a Foreign Language at Georgetown University in the fall of 1993. Twelve of the subjects were Spanish speakers, eight Korean, six Japanese, four Portuguese and two each Embera, French, Italian, Thai and Wolof speakers. Appendix A summarizes the relevant personal information. At the time data was collected length of stay in the United States ranged from ten days to five years. The average length of stay was 6.7 months. Among the informants there were 24 female and 16 male students.

Results

The results of this study are summarized in appendices B to D. In general, our students sample reports familiarity with the meaning of most of the terms. At the same time, the data provide a number of interesting discussion points. Predictably a contradiction became apparent between some of the answers given in part 1 with those later given in part 3. That is, a student may indicate no familiarity with a term listed initially and then later provide judgments about its relative negativeness. This problem could not be readily addressed in a study of this size. At the same time we do not think it likely that it could be completely dealt with whenever subjective reactions of this nature are to be measured. Further study is projected that will make use of a pretreatment or additional section wherein students are asked to provide definitions for a limited number of terms, among them racial and ethnic labels. Subjective portions of the survey should be administered thereafter. In this way questionable responses may be eliminated from the corpus, and the remaining responses will be validated based upon this requisite knowledgeability check.

Part 1: Passive Knowledge

Analysis of the data reflecting passive knowledge or simple awareness provided a pleasant surprise: the words 'spic', 'gook' and 'slant' which are the most derogatory, were basically unfamiliar to our students. No more than two students were familiar with any one of these terms. (See Appendix B).

When comparing higher with lower level students, as we might expect, advanced level students showed in almost all cases greater familiarity with a larger number of terms. This is supportive of the general understanding that students' knowledge of culture and language will increase as does their length of stay. Accordingly we note that 18 out of 20 advanced students are familiar with the term 'Asian American' while only 16 out of 20 lower level students are. Similarly, for 'African-American' 18 out of 20 advanced students are opposed to ten out of 20 lower-level students indicate familiarity. The difference in familiarity for 'black' and 'Negro' between advanced and lower level students is, however, not significant. Compare 16 advanced with 12 lower level informants claiming familiarity with 'black', and 18 advanced with 14 lower level claiming awareness of "Negro."

These results also confirm that foreign students have acquired sociolinguistic knowledge prior to their arrival in the States. This knowledge, however, may not be current with respect to the existing sociocultural norms of meaning at the time of arrival. Of course, the meanings of recently coined terms or of terms undergoing semantic broadening or narrowing, continue to be diffused, for nonnative as well as for native speakers of English. Such shifts in meaning are not always easily identified or may not yet be codified. In this regard a recent *Washington Post* article reports on the changing norms of acceptability

for some of the terms used in this study. (See Appendix E for an extract of relevant information in the article.) According to that newspaper's survey of African Americans, the preferred terms in 1993 were African American and Black, while 'colored' and 'Negro' have continued to wane since 1969. In our study students also report awareness of 'Latino', described by the *Washington Post* as the increasingly used term in that daily's stories. Overall the most widely recognized terms (by at least 80% of our students) are 'Negro', 'Hispanic', and 'Oriental'.

Part II. Active Knowledge

The purpose of the second part of our questionnaire was to assess active knowledge, or to predict which terms students might use (Appendix C). Again it was a pleasure to see that either due to lack of detailed knowledge or even awareness that a given term has bad connotations, students denied using any of the following: 'nigger, spic, Chicano, slant, and gook'. Only four students thought that current social norms permit the use of 'colored'. Overall the labels students indicated they would use most included: 'black, African-American, Hispanic, Latino and Oriental.'

Among the 22 who said they would use African American, 16 are in the advanced level group. Again this is consistent with these students' length of stay in the United States, attesting to greater familiarity with developments in American society in general, and with the increased acceptability of the politically correct term 'African American' in particular. With regard to the use of 'Oriental', there is evidence of both passive awareness and active knowledge; many know it and would use it. The role of the native language in determining our informants' degree of familiarity is not clear but at least one observation seems appropriate. Of the 40 international students actively learning English as a foreign language, 16 speak Asian languages, 4 speak African languages, and 20 speak European Romance languages. For this latter group, it is interesting to note that 'Oriental' exists as a cognate in each of the languages.

Summary of Ratings

In examining the overall ratings for the terms tested, it is noted that there may be a tendency towards hypercorrection (Appendix D). Some words are not yet widely accepted. The pertinence of the author's personal anecdotal experience is reflected in the data: 'black' while generally accepted by most as neutral (22 out of 40), is thought to be negative or very negative by a significant number (10 out of 40). This misconception would prevent accurate use and would likely preclude students' use of the term altogether even though such use is completely socially acceptable.

Similar evidence is presented for 'Chicano': 22 students feel it is negative and 8 very negative, leaving only 4 who think it is neutral. This suggests that these

students have had insufficient input or have not benefited from any form of overt instruction as to the sociocultural appropriateness of this term. Likewise heightened awareness of 'Latino' and its popularity (as mentioned in the *Washington Post* article) is not consistent with the impressions of 14 students who feel it is a negative or a very negative term.

Discussion

Implications of the present study are several. First, changes to include an increase in the scope of this study, may be potentially beneficial. Such changes would include the knowledgeability check described previously. This check would strengthen the observations made about informant subjective judgments. Secondly, this study suggests the need for greater awareness among EFL learners of terms which are emotionally charged, and vary as to political and social acceptability. This knowledge will be acquired over time as a result of interaction with native speakers and exposure to the media, but awareness should be generated in the ESL/EFL classroom, especially for the most recently arrived.

A recommendation that all or some of these terms be explicitly taught, however, is subject to at least two qualifications. Since many racial and ethnic terms derive their meaning from local or regional contexts, what may be acceptable in one part of the country as a polite or neutral term of reference or address may be subject as epithet or insult elsewhere. Furthermore, a distinction must be made between in-group use and use by an outsider. Acceptability is determined by the members of the group labeled. In some cases use is common among group members, marks group identity and conveys relations of solidarity or intimacy. Clearly since the parameters of use for racial and ethnic terms are best known by those so labeled, discretion and simple avoidance must continue to be advised. Finally, second language learners of English need to know how to recognize the variety of contexts of possible use, i.e. the immediate setting, present conversational circumstances, speaker/addressee relationship, as well as the judgment and probable reaction of the addressee or group being labeled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the informants have achieved a certain measure of sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence in English as evidenced by their responses in this survey. We hasten to point out that a number of cases remain in which students are not aware that some labels are highly emotionally loaded. These instances remind us that students should be informed and warned of the implications for accurate communication and probable consequences of inappropriate application. We suggest they be informed to the greatest extent possible, in order to avoid misunderstanding, misjudgment and possible hostility. At the same time, students who are knowledgeable of the variety and the variability of such labels, should become mindful, not only of the possible reactions

of offended group members, but also of the need to tolerate and respect the various racial, ethnic and other groups which comprise society. A balanced effort in the classroom to deal with the issue of racial and ethnic labels can assist the second language learner of English in becoming a communicatively and culturally proficient user o the language and respected me ber of society.

References

Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Claire, Elizabeth. 1990. *An indispensable Guide to Dangerous English!* Dundee, IL: Delta Systems

Dunkling, Leslie. 1990. *A Dictionary of Epithets and Terms of Address*. London: Routledge.

Thomas, Jenny. 1983. "Cross-cultural pragmatic failure". *Applied Linguistic* 4/2: 91-112

Wierzbicka, Anna. 1991. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: the Semantics of Social Interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Appendix A: Demographic Data

Total Number of Informants:	40	**Number of Different L1s:**	9
Male:	16		
Female:	24	**L1 Speakers:**	
		Embera	2
		French	2
Level of English Study:		Italian	2
Beginning:	20	Japanese	6
Advanced:	20	Korean	8
Length of Stay:	Days:	Portuguese	4
Shortest:	10	Spanish	12
Longest:	1825	Thai	2
Average:	200	Wolof	2

Appendix B: Passive Knowledge

Label:	*Beginner*	*Advanced*	*Total*	*Per Cent*
Black	*12*	*16*	*28*	*70*
Negro	*14*	*18*	*32*	*80*
Afro- American	*6*	*6*	*12*	*30*
nigger	*4*	*10*	*14*	*35*
African-American	*10*	*18*	*28*	*70*
colored	*2*	*10*	*12*	*30*
Hispanic	*14*	*20*	*34*	*85*
spic	*0*	*2*	*2*	*5*
Latino	*18*	*12*	*30*	*75*
Chicano	*4*	*6*	*10*	*25*
oriental	*16*	*18*	*34*	*85*
Asian- American	*8*	*18*	*26*	*65*

slant	*2*	*0*	*2*	*5*
gook	*0*	*2*	*2*	*5*

Appendix C: Active Knowledge

Label	*Beginner*	*Advanced*	*Total*	*Per Cent*
Black	*10*	*12*	*22*	*55*
Negro	*6*	*6*	*12*	*30*
Afro-American	*4*	*4*	*8*	*20*
nigger	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
African-American	*6*	*16*	*22*	*55*
colored	*0*	*4*	*4*	*10*
Hispanic	*6*	*16*	*22*	*55*
spic	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
Latino	*14*	*8*	*22*	*55*
Chicano	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
oriental	*16*	*16*	*32*	*80*
Asian-American	*4*	*12*	*16*	*40*
slant	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
gook	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*

Appendix D: Ratings

	Very negative	*negative*	*neutral*	*positive*	*very positive*	*don't know*
Black	*20*	*25*	*55*			
Negro	*35*	*35*	*20*	*10*		
Afro-American		*15*	*35*	*40*	*5*	*5*
nigger	*65*	*15*	*10*		*5*	*5*
African-American		*5*	*30*	*45*	*10*	*10*
colored	*20*	*30*	*20*	*15*		*15*
Hispanic	*10*		*70*	*15*		*15*
spic	*30*	*30*	*10*			*30*
Latino	*5*	*30*	*35*	*15*	*10*	*5*
Chicano	*20*	*55*	*10*			*15*
oriental			*65*	*30*	*5*	
Asian-American			*40*	*45*	*10*	*5*
slant	*40*	*10*	*5*	*5*		*35*
gook	*35*	*10*	*5*			*50*

Appendix E: Extract for Washington Post (January 23, 1994)

	1987	1989	1991	1993
Number of stories with the term:				
African American	42	301	626	1,422
Latino	85	71	191	389
African-Americans preferred (%):	1969	1979	1989	1993
African American			22	28
Afro-American	10	1		
Black	19	72	66	37
Colored	20	12		
Negro	38	9		